

Caz's Blog

Gayton to Braunston and return

Recommended - 3 night break (we collected the boat Saturday afternoon and returned it Monday evening)

Highlights - 26 Locks and Braunston Tunnel

Day 1

It has been over two years since our first day hire adventure; we didn't intend to leave it this long to take a holiday but life just got in the way! Rebecca, my daughter is beyond excited about sleeping on the boat, in fact it is all she has talked about since I told her about our mini break. My son is less impressed as it means he'll be without his Xbox for the whole weekend but he perked up when I told him the new Sandpiper Class has two TV's!

Our journey to Gayton takes 1.5 hours but we leave early to allow enough time to stop at the Tesco Extra just 10 minutes away from the Marina (Junction 15a M1) to get our shopping, there is a massive selection of DVD's so we stock up thinking about our evening's entertainment on board!

We arrive at 2:30pm and the Marina is already busy with customers in different stages of their boat handover. We watch the safety DVD and Zoe takes us through the lock demonstration before the housekeeper walks us through the boat. Finally, our engineer, Lewis takes us through the technical handover and just as it starts to feel a little overwhelming he reminds us that everything he has just told us is in the manual. Working in the Booking office I am aware of the handover procedure but I am so impressed by Gayton, they are so organised and clearly turnaround day is a well-oiled machine!



Our boat, Purple Sandpiper.

We plan to cruise on the Grand Union and as our boat is facing the wrong way Lewis stays with us, reversing past the Marina, then driving into the entrance and easily turning the boat – clearly he has

done this many times before! I remember him telling us that you always point the boat into a turning place rather than reversing – something that I remind Clive of later....

Lewis jumps off and we are now on our own. I move down to the front to join the kids and as we approach Gayton Junction there is a boat coming from the left – the kids go into a panic and start shouting ‘Dad there’s a boat!!’ – I look back at Clive and he’s shrugging, I’m not sure if he means ‘I can’t hear you’ or ‘don’t worry’! The boater looks nervous but as we slow down he passes us with plenty of room and gives us a knowing smile. Probably thinking, good job she’s not at the helm!

We turn right, on to the Grand Union and start to cruise towards Bugbrooke which is our destination for the evening. It is only about 1 hour and 15 minutes lock free cruising to Bugbrooke, so I decide to make a cup of tea and relax whilst Clive does all of the work! The canal is so peaceful and quiet, with hardly any other boats around and as the light begins to fade I can’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be.



Looking at the Nicholson’s guide there don’t seem to be any obvious moorings at Bugbrooke so we continue on past bridge 36 and end up mooring after bridge 35. We walk back to Bugbrooke Wharf bridge and take the path into the Village, it’s a lovely evening and we enjoy looking at some of the pretty houses as we walk to what seems to be the centre of the village. There’s a general store to the right and to the left we spot the Bakers Arms, the kids are keen to see the selection of treats in the shop but we just want to relax with a pint of Guinness – the adults win and we shuffle into the bar. The pub is lovely and welcoming with a few bar tables and a restaurant to the back. There is slight panic when we are told that the restaurant is fully booked but luckily we can eat in the bar, so we make ourselves comfortable. The food is amazing and we can see why the pub must be so popular. The kids want pudding but we remind them we are going to go to the shop and that they can choose what they like – win win!!



The Bakers Arms - Bugbrooke

The shop is a tardis and caters for everything, we leave with a massive selection of food, we certainly won't need to visit a shop again! We head back to the boat and convert the dinette into a bed so we can curl up with our snacks and watch a film together.

Day 2

Our first full day of cruising and we are planning to get to Braunston, around 6 hours away and find a pub showing the football (it is an important match apparently). We have about 2 hours cruising before we arrive at our first ever set of locks and we are both excited and terrified! For this lock free stretch I take up my position at the front of the boat; we meander through a mixture of open countryside, tree lined canal, pass the occasional marina and look out for ducks.



We moor up just before the first of Buckby Locks for lunch and then take a walk down to the bottom lock to assess the situation. We see that there are already boats waiting at the moorings before the lock so we decide to get a little closer and join the queue. Buckby Locks are wide locks, meaning that you must share each lock with another boat, this was initially daunting but actually was a complete relief as we were really lucky to pair up with a large group of experienced boaters! The skipper guided Clive into the lock and we shared lock responsibilities with the rest of their crew. We continued to share the locks with the same crew for the rest of the lock flight but at Norton Junction they took a right turn on to the Leicester section of the Grand Union Canal – now on first name terms we were sad to see them go!

As we head towards Braunston Tunnel I see Clive messing with his phone, apparently the football is about to start and he's getting twitchy – oh dear – I assumed kick off would be a lot later. I hate to tell him but he's only got around 30 minutes until we're at Braunston Tunnel and he won't get a signal in there!

We're following a boat as we approach Braunston Tunnel and realise that this is a good thing, as we descend into darkness not only do we have the light from our headlamp we also have theirs which helps as a boat passes us.... Yikes! The kids love being in the tunnel until they are dripped on and they retreat inside but I find it fascinating, the smell, the noise – you really begin to imagine what life would have been like when the canals were being used for their original purpose.



Leaving Braunston Tunnel

The fresh air is a welcome relief as we exit the tunnel and I rally the kids for the first of Braunston's Locks, we jump off and walk up to the first lock which we share with our new lock buddies. With some experience under our belt we claim our lock side and work the locks like professionals, we are really proud of ourselves!



Braunston Locks

As we navigate lock 3 of the flight we see The Admiral Nelson Pub, it looks busy, but not too busy so we decide to continue through the flight, turn the boat and walk back. There is a lovely little shop at Braunston Bottom Lock and the kids are desperate to go and have a look but it's getting late now and we really need to get ourselves moored up for the evening, we promise we'll go tomorrow and keep going to our designated turning point.



Braunston Marina

Now why didn't we listen to Lewis... Clive decides to go past the entrance of Braunston Marina and reverse the boat in, only it isn't as easy as that – we make a complete mess of the whole thing and find ourselves wedged! Just as it is getting a bit embarrassing – a boater who walked past us a while ago returns and thankfully takes pity on us. He gives directions from the towpath and we make it clear, phew, we don't waste any time mooring up – we're starving now! It's dusk so we grab the torch for later and start walking to The Admiral Nelson, it looks so inviting from a distance but oh, I should have checked my guide... it doesn't serve food on a Sunday.



Admiral Nelson Pub at Lock 3, Braunston.

Ooops! And I didn't bring the guide with me! After a lively debate we walk back to the boat and as we're checking the map we see a man walking his dog, we ask for his help and he suggests The BoatHouse. It's a short walk over Bridge 91 and across a road but it is actually canalside, if we were cruising through Braunston we could have moored up outside. It is a large pub with plenty of tables and we are seated by the window overlooking the canal, result. Although the food is what you would expect from a pub chain it is still really good and the kids are happy. We laugh about our fraught last few hours and Clive finds a big screen to catch the football highlights.



The BoatHouse, Braunston.

It's dark as we leave the pub and the kids love walking back to the boat using the torch, it's a little bit spooky and we're pleased to get inside our boat and put another film on – the boys watch their film at the front of the boat and me and Rebecca cuddle up with our duvets on the dinette.

Day 3

We are up early as we need to get all the way back to Gayton tonight. As we arrive at Braunston Bottom Lock we're surprised to see it over-flowing, we must be the first boaters of the day and what we're seeing is the pressure from water building up overnight. We do struggle initially to open the lock, unsure if something is blocking the gate or if the leaking water is stopping the lock emptying fully – we never really know why as with a little perseverance it opens eventually! Sadly, we don't get to have a mooch in The Boat Shop as it isn't open yet, we really wanted to buy a few souvenirs and support them in what must be a very seasonal trade.



Braunston Bottom Lock.

We make good time through Braunston Locks and Braunston tunnel and it's not long before we're at Buckby Top Lock. We can see two boats going into the lock ahead, with the help of 2 volunteer lock keepers who are wearing their high vis jackets. We moor up and I walk ahead to speak to the lock keeper; he tells me that we will need to wait for another boat to arrive from the opposite direction before they will fill the lock to avoid wasting water. A small queue of boats is starting to form our side of the lock and just as they decide we've waited long enough a boat appears in the distance. We all stand back whilst the crew arrive to work the lock, declining the offer of help from the lock keepers. As first in line to enter, the lock keepers suggest we jump onboard whilst they do all of the work, keen to get moving, we agree! At lock 8 there is a lovely little canal side shop which was closed when we passed on Sunday, it's now open and sells ice creams, hurrah! We have limited time to look as we can't hold up our lock buddies – so we jump off and run ahead – a few souvenirs in hand and an ice cream each, we meet Clive at the lock.



Anchor Cottage and its craft shop at Lock 8, Buckby Locks.

With the locks now behind us I decide it's my turn to take the helm, it has been a while, but I'm surprised how quickly I pick it up. We pass Bugbrooke and Grasshopper Warbler (another ABC hire boat) is coming towards us, the family look like they're having a great time and we exchange hello's – I did wonder where they were heading! We had planned to get back to Gayton before 5pm but we're not going to make it, although I did check the procedure for leaving the keys before we left the marina it would have been nice to say goodbye. We unload and leave Purple Sandpiper in the same spot we collected her, sorry to have to go – we will try to have a longer break next time!

We had a fabulous time and would definitely recommend this route to first timers who want locks and to experience a tunnel.



My two Lock Keepers!